DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 149 343 CS 203 852

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TITLE The Composition Program: The Hole of It.
PUB DATE 77
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (28th, Kansas City, Missouri, March 31-April 2, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Change Strategies; *Composition (Literary); Educational Change; Educational Needs; English Curriculum; *English Instruction; *English Programs; Financial Problems; Futures (of Society); Higher Education; *Program Improvement

ABSTRACT

As cutbacks continue to be made in college programs and faculty, composition programs will have to prove themselves effective or else face massive cutbacks. To improve their programs, composition instructors should abandon the ineffective approaches of the past, which have been based on formal courses in the principles of good composition, and should recognize that students learn to be literate writers not through the study of rhetoric, but through constant directed practice in writing. They should make an effort to organize programs based on student needs, to establish competency based requirements and forget the credit hour fixation, to establish university-wide programs to improve student writing, and to assist other departments in developing writing programs. In addition, they should attempt to make effective use of the composition teaching budget, to choose staff members on the basis of their teaching ability rather than on the basis of their formal academic training, and to develop programs for nontraditional students. (GW)

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THE COMPOSITION PROGRAM: THE HOLE OF IT

Vincent Gillespie

I am almost tempted to begin with that cliched, if somewhat paraphrased, litany, "It is the best of times; it is the worst of times"--almost but not quite. The temptation is natural, however, to the situations which we face in the universities today and to the comments I want to make about them. To be alive and well and to be teaching composition today, for all its miseries, is more promising than it has been for years. Newsweek and Harpers, "The Chronicle" and The New York Times have decided that student writing is deplorable and must improve. Senior members of our own English departments now think GTA's should be professionally trained to teach composition, should take one course anyhow. Here and there, a dean talks about smaller class sizes. Departments that once abandoned the composition requirement are looking regretfully back, are deciding for one reason and another that good education and better politics require a return to a multi-sectioned course with its guaranteed enrollment of hundreds on some campuses and thousands on others. Things are, indeed, more promising than ever. Those of us who have been teaching comp for twenty or twenty-five years appreciate the unintended irony of those who insist that we are not chairmen but chairpersons: we can remember when our departments did not consider us people much less persons.

But for all that, the other half of the litany is true, also. Student enrollments are down and will go deeper, for most institutions, disastrously so. Faculties are being cut back on campus after campus. Legislatures and foundations look carefully at what the colleges are doing before committing the dollars. Government research funds and student loan programs are reduced by each session of Congress. Deans look carefully at each potential tenure appointment, and at some institutions, deny them altogether. Across the land "accountability," "accountability" is chanted over and over by legislators, regents, and chancellors.

You know the story as well as I, and it does not need emphasis. It may

well be that for comp programs this is the best of times. I hope it is. But I also know that we are coming upon the worst. The decline in enrollment has started, and demographers know that our college population will decrease by twenty-five percent in the 1980's. That's a given, and neither optimism nor ignorance will alter it. But I've been amazed at general faculty reactions to the threat that is implicit, and as chairperson of my university's Faculty Senate academic planning and financial exigency committee, I've heard a lot of them. I am sure many of you have also. Without getting into specifics, it's fair to say that many of our colleagues indulge in pipedreams, and I assure you that at today's prices, they are expensive pipedreams. As directors and chairpersons of comp programs, we can't indulge, for like it or not, our programs, for all the emphasis they are given today, are most vulnerable to the financial and political pressure that will be felt universally. The decisions we make today will determine whether we mark "fair sailing" or merely stand at flood tide awaiting the ebb. We had better think twice and even thrice about our immediate answers to today's clamor for the improved teaching of composition.

Obviously, single, safe answers will not be found. Though student writing is for most characteristically mediocre and though a sentence fragment at Liberal U may be the same as that at State Ag or something-or-other juco, comp programs will not address themselves to all problems in the same way. Staff make-up, student body mix, administrative attitudes, and financial resources will all affect the comp programs we design. Even the objectives of the programs will differ. If one's university strongly supports the liberal arts, the comp program's definition of "service" will differ from that in an institution where the literature is suspect. An urban university's insistence that it needs a strong remedial program will not be echoed by the medium-size state college in mid-America whose

English faculty insists that it should not be so put-upon. And the eventual retrenchment will not be felt equally on all campuses. The problem will not be as severe for the average junior college as it will be for the state university. The Plains states will feel it less than will the large, Eastern urban areas. Heaven cannot protect the small denominational colleges, and only Hell knows what will happen to the countless medium-size state colleges which bloated themselves during the Fifties and Sixties.

In the meantime, you and I are going about our duties in, I presume, what most believe to be a responsible manner. We are attempting to improve our staff's professional training. On some campuses we are restoring the comp requirements we threw out decades ago. On practically all, we hope to increase the comp requirement by one more semester. We argue for more rhetoric or more literature or more basics. We want money for a remedial course or for an expanded writing lab. We argue that reduced class sizes is necessary. We renew the debate over the advantages inherent in those communications programs that brought the 4C's into being twenty some years ago. In the meantime, we set about solving the near traumatic linguistic problems of those students--the Black, the Chicano, the ghetto white, the rural cracker--who were brought into the universities by the socio-economic and political turmoil of the Sixties. And we attempt once again to improve the near incomprehensible writing of the lower half of white-middle class America.

Yes, in the meantime, you and I are being very responsible and very traditional and very foolish. We ought to know better. All our current answers to the problems were tried years ago and were found wanting. We have had our remedial programs. We didn't lessen or abandon comp requirements because they, having done their jobs, were no longer needed. We tried the basics and our liberal doses of literature, those graceful models of good prose. Rhetoric is not new to comp classes. We've tried a thousand approaches. No road led to Valhalla.

Do we seriously believe that most students will solve their communication problems in one or two semesters? Can eight or nine or eighteen or nineteen themes do it? Will the student who takes composition for but one-twentieth of his required college credit hours find our labors so effective that they will counteract the conditions engendered in the other nineteen-twentieths? Do we believe that if we but show them the way and instruct them in the principles of good composition that our students will willingly take the time and sweat the blood that are necessary if they are to write well? Does the catechism make the priest?

And our past experience taught us one other lesson we must not forget, especially today. Our colleagues think little of us. We have not done our job, they say. Examine their perceptions of us. Our colleagues willingly gave us preferential treatment by making our courses univeristy requirements. Because of the obvious advantages, we accept, however nominally, the obligations inherent in the "service course" rationale. Our colleagues feel that we have unnecessarily large staffs, that we use composition primarily to support graduate programs, that we promote all we can get. We designed our service courses, as often as not, they say, to further the cause of liberal education, to satisfy our desires to teach "academically respectable" courses in rhetoric or linguistics or communication theory, to protect our students from the ultimate barbarism of our cultural waste-land, and to prepare them to be English majors. It's no wonder they gripe at us. How good our defenses would be if we could but say, "However, we taught them to write."

The tragedy of it all is that we really do know how to do the job. Our universities and colleges can turn out students who need not embarrass us when they write their first letter of application. To do it, however, we will have to conceive of our roles and our comp programs in a vastly different light. Now is

the time to do so. The interest is there, the support can be found, and our departments' survival may well depend upon our will. If we don't move before the end of the decade, retrenchment will be here and our university colleagues will again look to us. This time they will seek a different service.

Let us finally accept what the linguists and the behaviorists among us have long been saying. English composition is not an academic discipline, and students will not learn to write by our treating it as one. We will not teach students to write by standing on a podium. We will not succeed by manipulating a syllabus to reflect the latest fad. We won't do it in one or two semesters of forty-five class hours regardless of what our lectures are devoted to. Let's stop confusing our teaching the structure of written communication with the teaching of the skills that produce it. We act most sophisticated and most impatient with our critics when we say that knowledge of grammar will not, per se, result in good writing, but we will go right on believing that teaching a knowledge of syntax, the principles of paragraphing, and the rhetoric of the composition will result in a generation of literate writers.

As are all possessors of knowledge, we feel professionally defined by that knowledge and we feel most responsible as teachers when we impart that knowledge to others. That is just and good. I do not deny the value of rhetoric or literature or of grammar or communication theory. We would still be operating in professional darkness without the competence which such knowledge has given us. English departments to the extent that they do not offer courses in classical and modern rhetoric or in such fields as semantics, linguistics, and communication theory either do not understand the nature of their own discipline or are perversely irresponsible in denying it. I for one would agree that all undergraduates should be required to take courses that would make them aware of rhetoric and of the function and operation of language in its social and psychological contexts.

But though I am quick to insist that such knowledge is necessary, I am equally adamant in my conviction that as directors and chairpersons we should not confuse the value of that knowledge with the tasks necessary for students if they are to learn to write. Although such knowledge is necessary to our fulfilling our professional responsibilities, we should not confuse the tool with the product.

Our job is to administer composition programs, to, that is, organize our institutions' resources with one end in mind: we are charged with the task of seeing to it that our students leave the universities and colleges as literate writers. To do so, we oversee the work of large staffs of varying competence and we are instrumental in determining the character and substance of our teaching materials and techniques. Near universally, we attempt to answer our charge by imitating the pedagogical methodology of all university disciplines. We organize our programs into one or two semester classes, place an instructor over them, and see to it that whatever we feel is substance is taught to students. Those who achieve minimum competency are passed along; those who do not, repeat the course. Just like chemistry or History of Art or Anthropology I. Teaching is describing structure: describe it and our job is done. Very neat.

If some of us feel the system needs improvement, we organize writing labs to give more of the same or argue that we need a remedial program to solve the difficulties of the hard core cases. We insist that all will be well if we had the money for smaller classes or if our GTA's were all required to have ABD's in rhetoric or linguistics or if we were permitted any number of panaceas.

Have not the years taught us anything, have the Murray's, the Moffett's, the Zoellner's, the Shaughnessey's never writ a line? I know this luncheon today is neither the time nor the arena for rehashing the thrust of their arguments nor even for discussing the pedagogical implications of their research. I realize that much of their research is not unquestioningly accepted by all in our profession, but if much of that research tells us anything, it insists that students must

engage themselves constantly in the act of writing and of examining that writing. We have learned that directed practice is sufficient to the task. Students must write, write again, and write further still. They must examine what they have written, and reexamine what they have rewritten. Such an atmosphere is necessary if students are to succeed. Our task is to organize the resources of the university to get that done. Only by the demands of that task will we fulfill our obligation, will answer our critics, justify our existence as a service course, assure our staffs that their expectation of future employment is reasonable, and teach students to write.

Our job, then, is an organizational one. Let us identify the students who need that service (I use the term "service" deliberately). Not everyone needs a course in the freshman year, and others aren't ready for it. If students write reasonably well, excuse them from the beginning composition course and pick them up later. If students are seriously deficient, offer them tutorial assistance at the level that will effectively build upon the strengths that they do have. How ineffectual it is, indeed, how counterproductive it is, to place such students in our traditional comp courses and frustrate them by dealing with material with which they cannot deal.

Let's us argue on our campuses for competency based requirements and forget our credit hour fixation. Some students will do enough in their discipline without our formal comp classes. Some will need eight semesters of work. Let us go into other departments with our instruction. We can organize writing programs for business students, for engineers, for scientists. Think what we could do in the social sciences! The best writing program I've seen in any university functioned successfully for several years in a school of engineering. I presume it is still going strong. Students took a one semester technical writing course in the first semester of their junior year. During each of the following three semesters, they

were required to enroll in at least one engineering course demanding a significant amount of writing. A member of the English department periodically discussed the class writing projects and served as a tutor whenever necessary. The papers were graded by both the engineering and the English instructor, and each agreed upon a single grade reflecting the overall composition and content value of the papers. Additionally, the department entered other classes to help design writing projects and instruct students in the carrying out of those projects. One of the most welcome features of the program was the English department's willingness to provide editing services to the Engineering faculty itself. Overall, the program's rationale was simple--the English department involved itself in improving writing wherever it found it. It succeeded because it created the climate that made writing possible, responsible, and a respected mode of learning.

We can do the same in nearly all departments. We can make writing a required discipline across the campus. Do not assume that other departments will not welcome our efforts. Do not assume that writing has disappeared from course after course because our colleagues do not think it valuable or because or because they are too lazy to require it. Far too frequently they gave up because their students wrote too incompetently to realize the rewards accruding to writers of decent prose. Many of our colleagues gave up because their reward was not commensurate with the labor required.

What I am asking is not popular, I know. Our vanity is threatened by it. Our traditional notion of our role as professors is threatened. Our presumed new acceptance by our departmental colleagues is threatened. All that my suggestion offers is that, unlike our past performance, it may get the job done. We can do a few things:

1. Get out of the office. It is too small to hold students and, as Thoreau would put it, far too small to talk in with our colleagues from other departments. Our job is organizational, and it is

political. Hassle committees that consider university-wide requirements. Serve on the Faculty Senate and voice a professional committment to fulfill our obligations as directors of service courses. Argue the rationale for a university-wide program to improve student writing. Argue that such a program is not merely preferred--it is necessary.

2. Get your program out of the English department building. Take it across the campus to where students are writing or should be writing. Stop thinking of English composition as just another course that is best taught in the manner of all others. Think of the magnitude of the problem and ask yourself if it can be solved by having freshmen write eight or nine themes a semester regardless of the theoretical constructs that shape our discussions of them. Every department has one or two or three faculty members who will greet us and will join us in beefing up their department's writing requirements. If you must, have but one course, as such, in composition, as such. And it doesn't have to be a three-hour course either. Use it only for writing instruction and writing practice. Place students in it only if they need it and only when they need it. Expand your writing lab: individualize its instructional techniques and offer the lab to any and all students who need or want it. Don't have one lab. Have one in building after building.

3. Understand the potentiality of the composition teaching budget. There is many a dollar there if it be used efficiently. Spending it at the freshman level and in the traditional classroom setting is efficient only in conception. Ask what the return on the dollar comes to. Much of that budget can best be spent when it is applied at the right time

and in the proper place. Be as concerned to provide your staff with roller skates as you are to provide them a cubicle.

4. Be realistic about staffing our programs. What we need more than Ph.D's in rhetoric or linguistics are simply people who write well, recognize the problems that result in poor writing, and are sensitive to, respectful of and patient with students. One doesn't have to have thirty or forty hours of rhetoric, or linguistics, or literature to teach composition effectively. I must admit to some impatience when over the last few years I have attended 4C's panels on teacher preparation. I've heard readers describe the minimum requirements for teaching comp, heard the audience voice adamant agreement, and listened to its indignant denunciations of our professional colleagues who have not seen the light. And more than once, I've looked at those panel audiences knowing that hardly a person there had such training, including those who presented the papers. Indeed, how many of us in this room have been so formally trained? We must have our Ph.D's in linguistics, rhetoric, and composition, I know, but they do not have to characterize our comp staffs. When I look at my department's comp staff, I well realize that good, effective teaching is a result of far more subtle concerns than those we insist should be reflected on a graduate transcript.

5. Let us recognize those students we are to help. Refine our testing instruments to discover what their needs are. Examine closely their functional responses to our teaching. Recognize that they are no longer those middle class Americans who just haven't been taught well before they come to us. Nowadays a good percentage of our students come from backgrounds and at ages that preclude our treating them as we ourselves were treated.

Well, I could go on, but since I'm stating nothing new, it's hardly necessary. My ideas aren't revolutionary. Not a one of us in this room hasn't thought of each suggestion long ago. What we have not done is give them a reasonable chance. We have not fought the battle on the lines we should have. The enemy is still with us because the war has intimidated us.

Let me close by sketching the alternative, the effect of continuing on our traditional course. I am no prophet, but months of examining the literature of retrenchment and financial exigency plans from a variety of colleges have suggested a profile of the future.

By the mid Eightees, worst-case projections show that enrollments will have dropped by one-fourth to one-third of their present numbers. Such a drop and the needs of a variety of other national social problems will accelerate the decline in education's share of state and federal dollars. Those who argue that we can make up our enrollment decline by, as they say, reaching-out to other students have not recognized that it requires nearly four thousand of them to replace one thousand high school graduates. Those who argue that the financial crises can be significantly offset by surgically trimming our budgets do not realize how badly the body will be distorted. Research will suffer, libraries will suffer; special programs will be cut, departments will be cut. Our faculties may be slashed, the projections tell us, by one third of today's size. Surgery will become butchery.

Normal attrition, early retirement, part-time employment, and reduced salary scales, all offered as alternatives, are all insufficient and impossible. And remember, we are still adding to the problem. Campus after campus still seeks to expand programs, still believes the myth of size, still adds faculty. In the best traditions of consummerism in an unstable market, we proliferate the goods that will glut our shelves. They will all be moved in a discounted market.

To make matters the worse, major universities, copying a pattern and setting a trend, are moving toward program budgeting. Soon will come accountability with its grim reapers sything the land with sharp edged numbers to measure program effectiveness and relevance, to cut down the ineffectual and, hence, the unnecessary. A bleak future, indeed, for our universities and colleges. And for us, it's but half the story.

A few myths are abroad in the land. One, retrenchment will be proportional from department to department. Nonsense. Program planning is designed to prevent that. Two, the more expensive programs will go first. Nonsense. That would only increase, more rapidly, the loss of foundation and government funds. Three, tenure will protect us. Nonsense. I've yet to see a financial exigency plan that argues the case convincingly. The AAUP guidelines don't insist on it. The courts have ruled it improper. Four, non-tenured members will be the first dismissed. Nonsense. Again, program planning not only prevents that, but it is designed to allow us to hire in one department while we fire in another. The myths go on and on.

It will not be civilized. Just as colleges, so too will departments and individuals fight for survival. And because our comp staffs are large, we will be sought out and we will suffer. We will suffer all the more because, unless we change our ways, our colleagues will argue not that we are special but that we are ineffectual, that our efforts are not worth our cost.

We have proved that though we labor mightily, our students do not become proficient. Now we must prove that we can do the job. If we do not, we will go by the board. Our universities will suffer, our departments will be decimated, and students will wonder what it was that we were once engaged in.